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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/SE, AF/SPG, AND DRL/IRF

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SUBJECT: POLICE RAID KHARTOUM EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

11. (U) Police raided All Saints Cathedral in Khartoum early on the morning of January 1, injuring six worshippers, one of them seriously. Some 500 people had gathered in the cathedral -- seat of the Episcopal Church of Sudan Diocese of Khartoum -- late on New Year's Eve for an annual prayer service to mark the coming of the New Year. According to eyewitnesses, approximately 100 police arrived outside the cathedral gates shortly after the beginning of the service, and called for the crowd to disperse over a loudspeaker. At 12:45 am, police fired at least eight tear gas canisters onto the cathedral grounds. One canister exploded inside the cathedral, destroying two chairs and seriously injuring one person. The congregation then fled through the vestry door, trampling several others and damaging church office equipment in the process.

12. (U) Police on the scene -- several of whom were high ranking officers, eyewitnesses said -- told church leaders that they were pursuing an armed man who had sought refuge in the cathedral, though church officials have openly doubted this explanation. Many believe the incident is a sequel to a similar raid in April 2001, when worshippers had gathered at the cathedral to protest the government's cancellation of Easter prayer rally in central Khartoum. The Deputy Governor of Khartoum State, a member of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), visited the cathedral on January 2 to view the damage; he told church officials the raid was a result of a "lack of command and control" among local police.

13. (U) The Bishop of Khartoum, Rt. Rev. Ezekiel Kondo, issued an open letter to the Governor of Khartoum State on January 6, demanding a full investigation. Kondo and other Episcopal Church of Sudan bishops also plan to meet later in the week in Juba, and will raise the matter with senior government officials during Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) anniversary celebrations on January 9. Kondo said he had been touched by expressions of support from other Anglican churches around the world, and publicly thanked Poloff for attending Sunday prayers at the cathedral on January 7.

14. (SBU) COMMENT: To our knowledge, this raid marks the first time since the 2001 raid on the cathedral -- and more critically, the first time since the signing of the 2005 CPA -- that authorities in Sudan have disrupted a religious gathering. While there is no indication that the raid was ordered by senior government officials, it clearly represents a setback for religious freedom in the country.

HUME